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Report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on education statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-first session (see E/2010/24, chap. I.A), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on education statistics, which is presented to the Commission for information. The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2011/1.

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Report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on education statistics

I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to a request of the Statistical Commission at its fortieth session, held in 2009, addresses two items, namely, the revision and implementation of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) and the establishment of an intersecretariat working group on education statistics.

II. Revision and implementation of the International Standard Classification of Education

2. Work on the latest revision of the International Standard Classification of Education was mandated in a resolution of the thirty-fourth General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), held in October and November 2007. UNESCO was asked to initiate a consultation of experts from member States and relevant international organizations about ISCED, taking into account the changes that had taken place in the structure of education systems since the revision undertaken in 1997 (ISCED 1997) and giving special attention to higher education.

3. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics was charged with leading this review, working in close collaboration with relevant international organizations including, in particular, its education data collection partners, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat). In late 2008, the three organizations held a joint seminar on ISCED concepts and implementation, which helped to identify some of the key elements of ISCED 1997 which might need to be revised, including the structure of the tertiary education levels; the measurement of educational attainment and the implementation of ISCED in household surveys; the definition and classification of learning activities and the governance of the implementation of ISCED.

4. A technical advisory panel of 15 education and statistics experts from across the world,[1] including representatives of key international organizations,[2] was established to guide the review strategy and take part in the development of detailed proposals for the revision. At its fortieth session, held in February 2009, the Statistical Commission endorsed the establishment of the panel and encouraged the participation of countries, especially developing countries, in the review process.

5. The technical advisory panel held four meetings between January 2009 and December 2010, with a fifth meeting planned for February 2011. The scope of the revision was determined, based on the advice of the panel, in the light of the timetable for adoption by the General Conference. In 2009, detailed proposals for

[1] Namely, Africa, the Arab States, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and Latin America.

[2] The Statistical Office of the European Communities, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the United Nations Children's Fund.

the revision were developed and reviewed by the panel and were discussed, in 2009 and 2010, at separate regional meetings with experts from the Arab States, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. A total of 54 experts attended the regional expert meetings, with an average of 8 to 12 experts at each meeting, together with panel members and staff of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Discussions on the proposals also took place with national experts attending meetings on education statistics held by Eurostat and OECD in both 2009 and 2010. Presentations on the proposed revision were given at international conferences, including the World Conference on Higher Education, held at UNESCO headquarters in July 2009, and the fourteenth World Congress of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies, held in June 2010.

6. In addition, proposals were presented and discussed with the Expert Group on International Economic and Social Classifications at its meeting in September 2009.

7. The proposed revisions cover the following points:

(a) An extension and renaming of the lowest level of education (early childhood education, or ISCED 0) to include educational programmes for very young children (typically aged 0 to 3 years) but as a separate subcategory, entitled "early childhood development", to allow for continuity of the time series of statistics on pre-primary education;

(b) More extensive definitions of the types of education, in particular formal and non-formal education, to allow for a more precise definition of the coverage of education within ISCED;

(c) A simplification of programme orientation from three categories to two (general and vocational);

(d) The introduction of new concepts of successful completion of ISCED levels, with or without access to higher levels of education, which replaces the ISCED 1997 concept of programme destination and better distinguishes between completion and non-completion of ISCED levels;

(e) The introduction of qualifications as a derived variable within ISCED;

(f) A redefinition of education at the tertiary level, taking into account changes across the world at this level since 1997; the revision proposes four levels of tertiary education: short cycle tertiary; bachelor's level and equivalent degrees; master's level and equivalent; and doctorate level;

(g) New coding systems both for educational programmes and for educational attainment;

(h) A new governance procedure for ensuring the effective adoption and implementation of the new ISCED.

8. The initial proposals were revised in the light of feedback from regional and international experts. A complete draft text was finalized and approved by panel members in May 2010 and first presented at a two-day inter-agency meeting and informational presentation to UNESCO at its headquarters in Paris, also in May. The draft ISCED was then sent for global consultation to all member States of UNESCO, to both their Ministries of Education and, with the assistance of the United Nations Statistics Division, all national statistical offices. In addition, the proposals were sent to members of the Expert Group on International Economic and

Social Classifications, members of the ISCED technical advisory panel, the national and regional experts who were invited to the regional meetings on ISCED in 2009 and 2010 and the relevant international agencies and national contacts responsible for submitting data on education, literacy or educational attainment to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics or its data collection partners, OECD and Eurostat.

9. By the end of the consultation, in late October 2010, over 110 responses from more than 80 countries had been received, including detailed comments from members of the Expert Group, Eurostat and other regional or international agencies. At the time of writing, these responses, which are generally supportive of the proposals, were being analysed and assessed. The draft text will be finalized in collaboration with members of the panel in mid-February 2011.

10. The revised ISCED, after a review by the Executive Board of UNESCO in 2011, will be submitted to the General Conference of UNESCO in October 2011 for adoption by the member States of the organization.

11. The new ISCED will be accompanied by an extensive glossary of terms. In the period leading up to the adoption of the new ISCED, an operational manual will be drafted to assist countries in using the new classification. It will include practical examples of the mapping of national educational programmes to the new ISCED. Ultimately, all countries will be expected to complete an ISCED mapping, which is a tool expected to form a core element of the governance procedures.

12. Throughout 2011 and 2012 regional workshops run by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and education statistics meetings hosted by Eurostat and OECD will inform countries about the changes and assist them in adapting to the new classification. It is expected that the first international data collections based on the revised ISCED will take place starting in 2013, which will give countries adequate time to adapt national data reporting systems.

13. The scope of the current revision was determined in consultation with the panel. One key area, which has not been changed in the revision, is the classification of fields of education. It has been decided that this will be the subject of a subsequent revision. Work is expected to begin in 2011 on the development of a more detailed and up-to-date classification of fields of education and training and will involve the active collaboration of relevant international organizations including, but not necessarily limited to, Eurostat and OECD.

III. An intersecretariat working group on education statistics

14. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics has further considered the establishment of an intersecretariat working group on education statistics, to be led by the Institute, in order to improve coordination mechanisms, maintain and promote the development of international standards and minimize duplicate efforts among international agencies, concerning aspects not covered by existing mechanisms.

15. As documented in the report of the Commission's Task Force on Education Statistics, there is clear evidence of strong technical coordination among the major producers of cross-national education data and statistics, namely the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Eurostat and OECD, in terms of joint methodological development (e.g., the manual developed collaboratively by all three bodies (UOE manual) and the ISCED review), data-sharing and efforts to improve the efficiency

of data and metadata (e.g., Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) platforms), which reduces the reporting burden of member States and allows for collaboration in the use and interpretation of data.

16. Coordination has been improved at the global level, where the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has initiated collaboration in large-scale joint projects with such international agencies as the United Nations Children's Fund (for out-of-school children) and the World Bank (for benchmarking education systems for results), and where the Institute has been given responsibilities for sectoral leadership and is represented on the steering committees of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (for capacity development) and the International Household Survey Network (for survey-based data collection and methodology).

17. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics has also reached out to regional bodies: regional commissions and specialized agencies of the United Nations, regional development banks, intergovernmental and other groups in Africa and Latin America such as the African Union and the Organization of American States, in order to ensure improved coordination in the collection, processing and use of comparative education statistics. With the support of regional stakeholders, the Institute is launching new regionally specific data collections based on locally relevant information needs.

18. Furthermore, the Institute has engaged with reference groups in specific education subsectors, such as technical and vocational education and adult education, and is introducing several new thematic advisory groups that will draw on the expertise of the relevant international agencies.

19. In the light of these rapidly evolving contexts and new initiatives to strengthen coordination at the regional and global levels, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics is of the view that further time is needed in order to reassess and clarify the role and working modalities of an intersecretariat working group.